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SUBJECT: The ties that don't bind: Cohabitation
further strains troubled President/PM relationship

Refs: Colombo 54, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Since Sri Lanka's cohabitation experiment began in December 2001, President Kumaratunga and PM Wickremesinghe have been at daggers drawn, with relations plunging to new depths of late. Both sides have their complaints against the other and neither wears a white hat: From the President's perspective, the PM and his government have shown her little respect. The PM, in the meantime, finds the President mercurial and impossible to deal with. Amid their horrible personal chemistry hovers the aggravating factor that both are scions of political dynasties that have rubbed up against each other nastily for decades. Efforts by the U.S. and the international community may help the two leaders briefly refocus and act in the national interest. Permanently healing the breach between the two sides is not a likely possibility, however, and further crises are almost certain to occur. END SUMMARY.

Relations hit new Depths

2. (C) Since Sri Lanka's cohabitation experiment began in December 2001, the relationship between President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has been rocky -- and relations have only plunged to new depths of late. The recent downward spiral of action and reaction has included the following:

-- President's Takeover of Ministries: In early November 2003, while the Prime Minister was in Washington to meet with President Bush, President Kumaratunga suddenly took over the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and Mass Communications. She also suspended Parliament for a two-week period. Kumaratunga cited the GSL's "ineffective steps...to ensure national security" as the key reason behind her actions. (At the time, the President also declared a "state of emergency," but several days later her office retracted it, saying no emergency had ever been officially declared.)

-- Prime Minister's Response: Countering the President's early November actions, the PM rejected her explanation of the ministerial takeovers and demanded that all three portfolios be returned to government control immediately. From mid-November until mid-December, a joint committee composed of representatives of both leaders met to try to resolve the situation, but it had little success in ending the impasse. Further complicating matters, the PM made an unexpected announcement on January 7 that the government could no longer take responsibility for the February 2002 ceasefire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in light of the President's continuing control of the Defense Ministry (see Reftels). While his statement was mischaracterized by some as indicating that the GSL was pulling out of the ceasefire accord altogether, the PM's statement strengthened domestic and international concern that the cohabitation impasse was steadily undermining the peace process.

-- Issue of President's Term: In another recent complication, a dispute has arisen as to the exact length of President Kumaratunga's term in office. The details are confusing, but the President was sworn into office for her second, and final, six-year term in December 1999. Her call for presidential elections in the fall of 1999, however, came one year prior to the end of her first presidential term (1994-2000). While it was widely assumed that her second term would end in

late 2005 (six years from the 1999 election), the President apparently believes that she is entitled to the full six years of both terms (i.e., her current term in office would end in late 2006). The PM and his supporters are bound to object strenuously if the President actually moves forward and asserts that she can serve until late 2006.

The President's Complaints

13. (C) Aside from the latest tensions, there is a long track record of cohabitation friction between the two sides. Both sides have their own detailed list of complaints and neither wears a white hat. From the President's perspective, the PM and his government have shown little respect for her and her position. The President and her aides have complained, for example, that the government has not involved them in the peace process with the LTTE although she began the effort when she came to power in 1994 and brought the Norwegian facilitators in to work on the matter. The President also complains that she was not asked her opinion of the ceasefire accord with the LTTE before it was signed. Moreover, the GSL never invited a presidential representative to participate in the six rounds of peace talks with the Tigers that took place from 2002-2003. Feeling little ownership of the process, the President and her advisors have felt free to attack how it is being run, asserting that the Tigers are regularly violating the ceasefire accord with impunity even as their military forces grow in size and strength. Resentful of the international kudos the PM's efforts have reaped, the President and her advisers have also noted that when his United National Party (UNP) was in opposition from 1994-2001 it vociferously criticized the President's peace initiatives. They note -- as if it is indelibly burned in their minds -- an instance in August 2000, for example, when UNP MPs burned copies of the President's draft devolution proposal in Parliament (due to the UNP's failure to support the draft, it was never voted on).

14. (C) The President has also resented the personal attacks heaped on her by a group of the PM's ministers. These ministers -- G.L. Peiris, Ravi Karunanayake, S.B. Disanayake, and others -- have often hit out at the President in abusive ways. Karunanayake, for example, once accused Kumaratunga of bringing a listening device into a cabinet meeting and has criticized her face-to-face on other occasions. These ministers have also been at the forefront of the drafting of impeachment articles against the President on corruption and abuse of power charges. Although these charges have not been brought before Parliament (the UNP knows it cannot get the two-thirds support needed for passage at this time), the President is known to be extremely angry over the whole matter. On the more personal side, Kumaratunga is also known to resent that her son, Vimukhthi, was denied admission to a prestigious Colombo GSL-controlled high school in the early 1990's and that her appeal of the matter was rejected by the then-Minister of Education Ranil Wickremesinghe.

15. (C) Another aspect of President Kumaratunga's poor relationship with the Prime Minister is the fact that she wants to stay involved in politics beyond the limits of her term (which, as noted above, is slated to end in either two or three years). As she is unable to run for president again (a person can only serve two terms), Kumaratunga -- who is only 58 -- is known to be seriously thinking about trying to adjust the Sri Lankan Constitution to get rid of the executive presidency. In its place, she would return to the pre-1978 system in which the prime minister had executive powers. If this was done, the President would then become prime minister if her party formed the majority in Parliament. The PM, who like Kumaratunga has spoken out in favor of adjusting the Constitution to get rid of the executive presidency, knows that the President is considering this option. It is thought that he has no intention, however, of supporting any plan to change the Constitution because he wants to be (executive) president himself. Not adjusting the Constitution would also be convenient for Wickremesinghe because it would ease Kumaratunga effectively out of politics, as she almost certainly would not want to try to become prime minister in the current system dominated by the executive presidency. As the President moves toward the end of her term (in late 2005 or late 2006), her desire to stay in politics in a dominant role is bound to become an increasing bone of contention between her and the Prime Minister.

The PM's Complaints

16. (C) For his part, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe finds President Kumaratunga mercurial and impossible to deal with. He and his advisers assert that they have gingerly tried to improve cohabitation ties in various ways, but have found their entreaties rejected outright and sometimes with harsh language. (The PM is known to be upset by the President's semi-regular verbal assaults on his government: She recently characterized the PM's desire to take back the Defense Ministry as "a joke," for example; In the past, she has also referred to members of his government as "donkeys," "dogs," and "clowns in a circus.") They note that the President and her advisers have consistently taken a tack critical of the peace process, which makes it hard to involve them in decision-making on the matter, or to involve them in negotiations with the LTTE.

17. (C) There is also the matter of trust. Simply put, the PM and his team do not trust the President to any extent. There is a feeling that she and her advisers will agree to something, only to go back on the deal if they believe it is politically expedient. In making these charges, the PM and his advisers assert that the President has been working on "an escape hatch," which involves aligning her People's Alliance (PA) party with the radical Jananatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party. The possibility of a PA-JVP combine makes the UNP doubt that Kumaratunga sincerely wants to improve cohabitation ties. There is also a view among many in the UNP that the President is out "to get" the 10 or so current UNP MPs who defected from her PA party in late 2001 and thus precipitated the December 2001 election which the PA lost. These MPs include the outspoken G.L. Peiris and S.B. Disanayake, both of whom Kumaratunga is known to loathe. Finally, the PM is also known to resent deeply the poor treatment he believes was meted out to him by the President when he was the Leader of the Opposition from 1994-2001.

Abysmal Personal Chemistry

18. (C) Another factor aggravating the situation is the fact that President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe share abysmal personal chemistry. It is hard to imagine two individuals who are less alike -- and, in this case, opposites do not attract. The President is an outgoing person of rapidly shifting moods. She has great charisma and charm when she turns it on, and is excellent on the stump. By contrast, the PM is a technocrat and an excellent "inside" politician, and, in personality, is phlegmatic. He appears shy and sometimes uncomfortable in public settings. Unlike the President, he does not thrive on political confrontation. The few photos of the two leaders together underscore their acute discomfort with each other: in many photos, for example, the two are actively leaning away from each other and grimacing as if they cannot bear the sight of the other. Although political rivals can sometimes transcend day-to-day tensions and develop warm personal ties in Sri Lankan society, there is no record of Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe socializing with each other in any manner.

Scions of Battling Political Dynasties

19. (C) In some ways, the tensions between the two leaders were written in the stars (as this astrology-loving society would have it). The fact is that the two were virtually born to dislike the other given that they are both the scions of Sri Lanka's two great political dynasties. Kumaratunga, for example, is very conscious that both her father and mother were prime ministers (S.W.R.D. and Sirimavo Bandaranaike), and that her family tree includes major Sri Lankan figures going back generations. The PM, on the other hand, is related to D.S. and Dudley Senanayake, and John Kotelawala, the country's first three prime ministers, and also to President Jayewardene, who led the country from 1977-88. To put it mildly, these two clans have been at each other's throats for decades. Examples of brutal political infighting between the two clans are legion: Sirimavo Bandaranaike and her allies, for example, played hard ball with Dudley Senanayake and Jayewardene, the then-leaders of the UNP, after she twice won elections in the 1960s and 1970s. Settling scores years later, Jayewardene pushed through a bill in the early 1980s that stripped Sirimavo Bandaranaike of her civil rights (they were later restored). Against this

backdrop, it is clear that Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe -- who have known each other since they were children -- are simply acting in conformity with the long-standing familial rivalry. Lending substance to this, is the fact that Kumaratunga, Wickremesinghe (to a lesser extent), and their advisers will launch into detailed history lessons -- as if the events took place yesterday -- of how the other side did wrong on this or that issue, thus proving how malicious they are.

COMMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.

¶10. (C) As noted, neither side wears a white hat. Both Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe have done things that have served to spoil their relationship and they are both responsible for the fact that ties are at their nadir now. Efforts by the U.S. and the international community may help the two leaders briefly refocus and act in the national interest, however. Such ameliorative efforts have had some limited success in restraining the two sides from acting on their worst impulses in the past and they need to continue now. That said, while it may be possible for the international community to help ease passing crises, outside efforts almost certainly cannot heal the deep breach between the two sides (which exist even in the face of the national threat from the terrorist LTTE). Too much water has passed underneath the bridge to expect any long-term easing in the tensions. Moreover, with both leaders relatively young (Kumaratunga at 58 and Wickremesinghe at 54) prospects are that the tense situation that now prevails could go on for years. Indeed, given the family linkages, it is very possible -- if depressing to think about -- that the Kumaratunga/Wickremesinghe conflict could well be passed on to the next generation of Sri Lankan leaders, just as the conflict was passed on to them. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) Minimize considered.

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